

“Be Open”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
March 31, 2019**

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 35:3-6a

New Testament Lesson: Mark 7:31-37

Last Monday, the Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon broadcast the entire episode using a Galaxy S10 smartphone instead of the studio cameras. Rather than sitting at his desk, Fallon toured around New York City with the Tonight Show band and his celebrity guests.

He delivered meatballs to New York firefighters, interviewed martial arts champion Conor McGregor in an Irish Pub, and Saturday Night Live’s Michael Che at the Comedy Cellar. While there, Tonight Show guest Rachel Feinstein of Last Comic Standing performed her comedy set for the viewers at home.

All of this, of course, was to help Samsung sell more smartphones. (Say that 5 times fast – Samsung sell smartphones; not easy). And yet, making it easier for folks to relate to the Tonight Show was also part of the deal. With this unusual format, NBC was trying to catch the attention of more and more viewers, to connect with them in a personal and powerful way.

In today’s New Testament lesson, Jesus uses an unusual format to connect with those he is trying to reach. He’s traveling through the Decapolis, which was the center of Greek and Roman culture. These were people who had no real relationship with Jesus’ faith and religion. The crowd brings him a deaf man who has a speech impediment. Jesus takes the man aside and puts his fingers into his ears. Then he spits and touches the man’s tongue. Why would he do that? I mean, nearly all the other healing miracles are done through the spoken word – “Take your bed and go to your home,” in Matthew 9:6; “Stretch out your hand,” Matthew 12:13; “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam,” John 9:7; “Rise,” Luke 7:14; “Come out,” John 11:43; and “Be made clean,” Luke 5:13. Why is today’s healing so different?

Why does Jesus use all the theatrics to cure the deaf mute? Well, it’s because the guy was deaf and unable to speak clearly and Jesus wanted to be sure that that man knew what he was doing, that Jesus was there to heal him. To clearly communicate this, Jesus uses touch, sticking his fingers into the man’s ears to open them to sound, and spit, which the man would have known had curative powers.

That’s what they believed back then – that the saliva of a holy person had the power to heal, which I’m willing to try if anyone here is not feeling well today. Just see me after church.

No, I'm kidding. We know that saliva doesn't cure anything, no matter who it comes from. The point is it is important to Jesus that this man knows what he is trying to do for him, what he has to offer him. So Jesus comes up with a way of showing just how much he cares, a way of speaking directly to the individual, in a way he could understand and appreciate.

It wasn't about Jesus; it was about the man, focusing on his condition, his needs, his abilities; rather than on how Jesus "always did things." No, instead of doing things his way, Jesus fashioned his outreach, his communication to reach the individual in a powerful and effective way, so effective that even a man who could neither hear nor speak knew exactly what was available to him through Jesus Christ.

We here at First Church are focused on the same thing. We want to reach people with the healing power of Jesus – body, mind and soul – in the most powerful and effective way possible, with clarity and intention.

Just like with Jesus, this means coming alongside people wherever we find them, and communicating with them in a way that connects. It's not about doing it "our way," the way we've always done things. Rather, we are committed to showing we care in a way that speaks directly to the individual, in a way that can be understood and appreciated.

For instance, I've mentioned the Binder for Live course being offered three evenings in May. There are fliers on the credenza that you can give out to friends and family who may like to attend – first-come, first-served, with space limited. In this three-session course, participants will receive guidance and assistance organizing all their most important personal and financial information (confidentially) into a single binder for use in an emergency.

By offering this course, we want to show you – and people in your life who you invite – just how much we care. Beyond that simple statement, it's not really about church or religion. This course is about letting folks know we care, and that they are invited to come along side us for this and other events and offerings.

Other courses we have in mind include a Journey 101 course and an Alpha course for people new to church and religion, or for those of you who would like to revisit the basic principles and beliefs of Christianity. There are also the Taize' Services continuing this week and an upcoming Music Series in the works to feed the soul of folks around town who would be enlivened by some great music during a casual evening get together. And then there's Bonnie's Adult Vacation Bible School this June.

All of this is an effort to engage people on their level and invite them to come alongside us, which is just what Jesus did throughout his earthly ministry. Jesus was and is *the way* that people can come into contact with God like no other. Jesus takes people's most basic needs and translates them into a declaration of the glory of God, through a personal, visual, experiential encounter with the power of the Holy Spirit, changing their lives forever. That's what we strive to offer people—a personal, visual, experimental encounter with the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

Did you notice in our reading today, after Jesus healed the deaf mute, he ordered them to tell no one. "But the more he ordered them," says Mark, "the more zealously they proclaimed it." This shows us that the message and good news of Jesus is just that unstoppable! When we actually reach people with the gospel message—touch their hearts—there's nothing that can stop the Holy Spirit – comforting their souls, clarifying their vision, strengthening their spirit, and guiding them step by step along a pathway of faith, spiritual growth and discipleship. But to do that, we have to move beyond doing things "our way," offering only what we like, going only where we're comfortable, and only at times most convenient for us.

Think about it, if every single thing that goes on in this church is planned, scheduled and presented to meet our particular interests, availability and tastes, then we are the only people our church will ever reach. On the other hand, if we stretch ourselves to offer more and more encounters with people who know little or nothing about church and religion, then God will be there alongside us to meet their needs, to love them into the church.

And yes, this means stretching ourselves so that we fully grasp the good news of Jesus Christ, and can clearly communicate it to others. The world is full of people with speech impediments who are deaf when it comes to church and religion. In other words, what they hear and how they speak about the church and religion is unrecognizable compared to who we really are.

We need to break through their deafness and open their ears to hear the good news of Jesus Christ, to meet the living Spirit of God working and moving among us, to rely on the strength and wisdom of God to get them through their day. If we do that – for our fellow church members, our friends outside church, and others who God sends our way – then this church will be just as irresistible as the healing touch of Jesus.

Coming alongside others, one person at a time, in a way that connects – that's how we will make a difference in people's lives, and that's how we will ensure the vitality and growth of First Church, to God's glory.

Just as we invite others to come alongside us wherever they are, I invite you to come alongside one another in ministry wherever you can so that together, we can share the life-changing power and presence of Jesus Christ, in a way that really connects and serves. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

It is hard to be in the middle of anything, O God, and here we are in the middle of Lent. We can begin well with enthusiasm and commitment, and we can end well with joy and celebration. But we need your presence to make the middle meaningful.

Heal what we have been and listen, in these moments of stillness, to what we long to become. (Pause)

We pray, O Lord, for those recovering from illness and disease, and all those we keep in prayer.

We pray, too, for ourselves, that you would renew us as a new creation as we journey through Lent, that we might come to know the mystery of our faith – that we are loved far more than we could ever know.

Help us to claim this truth as our own. Awaken us to the reality that you loved us enough to give us your beloved son.

In thanksgiving for this gift of love, inspire us to so love others through Jesus, the Christ, who taught us to pray, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**